

Literacy Projects in Libraries

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LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA (LVA) is a nonprofit educational organization founded in 1962 to train volunteer tutors to teach adults and teens to read, write, and speak English. From the initial realization in 1960 that 11,000 adults in her own central New York community were functionally illiterate, LVA founder Ruth Colvin convinced enough local leaders that the problem needed addressing. Church Women United of Syracuse responded to Ruth's plea, placing her in charge of organizing a local volunteer response.

From this grassroots origin grew a national volunteer organization dedicated to helping that hidden segment of America's population who could not read and therefore were restricted from full participation in the social system. Once the public was made aware of the illiteracy problem that handicaps so many of its citizens, community recruitment of volunteer tutors came easily. Programs sprang up everywhere, first in New York State then in Maine. In 1972 a federal grant from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare funded the initiation of programs in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York City. Isolated LVA affiliates were begun in Illinois, Vermont, and New Jersey.

In 1985 LVA had 220 programs in thirty states and was expanding by nearly 30 percent each year. It became evident early on that for these LVA programs to continue and flourish after the Syracuse training team moved on, a volunteer program management system had to be developed. The resulting guidelines address the need for board development

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and management of each affiliate and incorporates a step-by-step process for successfully running a local LVA program. LVA is as well known for its volunteer program management system as it is for its contribution to literacy. Another hallmark of LVA's approach has been the continuous research and development of training materials to help the volunteer tutor, trainer, and program manager.

While thousands of individuals responded to the call for assisting the adult nonreader, convincing the established world—public schools, government, libraries, and business—was largely not forthcoming in the 1960s. Such lack of concern restricted the potential impact of LVA and other volunteer groups in their efforts to address the illiteracy issue. The establishment had the clout, the access to public attention, and the funds to make changes. Volunteers had conviction and dedication—they made changes in many individual lives, but illiteracy continued to increase at a startling rate.

It is hoped that all that is about to change! The “world” has awakened to the “crisis” of functional illiteracy. Adult Performance Level (APL) studies conducted by the University of Texas and publicized by David Harman and Carman St. John Hunter¹ provided the credibility and ammunition needed to convince government leaders, librarians, educators, and business leaders that widespread illiteracy adversely affected the social and economic well-being of America.

While several movements were simultaneously emerging to bring illiteracy to public focus, a turning point occurred with the American Library Association's decision to prioritize the active role of libraries in the eradication of illiteracy. In 1977 Helen Lyman wrote *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries*² which contained a wealth of information on adult illiteracy and comprehensive guidelines for librarians to use in initiating and supporting literacy programs. In 1979 the American Library Association, funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., conducted three workshops to train librarians in the techniques of establishing programs to teach basic literacy skills to functionally illiterate adults. The ripple effect of these workshops has been positive. Eight hundred and sixty-two additional librarians from around the country were trained to initiate literacy programs or increase cooperation with existing literacy projects. Within two years library-sponsored LVA affiliates increased 35 percent as a result of the ALA training. Libraries were becoming ideal partners for local LVA efforts. Many local LVA affiliates were finding homes in library locations.

In 1981 the American Library Association spearheaded the formation of the Coalition for Literacy calling together representatives of eleven educational, government, business, volunteer, and professional

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organizations. The results of the coalition's efforts are currently making history in focusing attention on the issue of functional illiteracy in America. The coalition's goal was to develop a strong national thrust that would generate public awareness of the literacy challenge and develop a mechanism to mobilize and channel the necessary resources to local community-based programs. The resulting national multimedia ad campaign and the CONTACT 800 referral number concentrate on recruiting volunteer resources and stimulating corporate involvement. The impact of the media campaign has been most rewarding, especially to local literacy groups that have been struggling for years to address the problem.

As a result of ALA's national role in literacy service, several state library departments and associations have adopted a similar proactive position on adult basic skills service. In turn, local libraries are responding to this bilevel mandate by assessing and activating an appropriate role for themselves in their community literacy effort. Such library efforts are emerging in a variety of formats and levels of cooperation with existing programs ranging from minimal to full participation.

In a 1984 national survey of LVA affiliates, program directors were asked to identify services provided by their community library in support of literacy services to the public. Responses were received from 107 affiliates—representing 58 percent of all LVA programs. Virtually all affiliates in New York State and Connecticut (the states with strongest LVA representation) replied to the survey, providing an excellent overview of the extent and kinds of library participation in LVA programs.

New York State

In 1984 the New York State (NYS) Board of Regents adopted a plan to develop community-based literacy programs for adults and young adults statewide through public libraries by 1988. New York has nearly \$200,000 in Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funds invested in eight literacy projects within library systems.

Literacy Volunteers of America programs throughout NYS are benefiting from the commitment. The survey of NYS reveals that all forty-seven LVA affiliates receive support from their local library or library system. Over fifty (at least one in each of the twenty-two public library systems) provide services, materials, or programs to help LVA train tutors and recruit students.

Services most commonly offered by NYS libraries to LVA programs include tutoring and training space and high interest/low level reading

collections for tutors to use with students. Libraries assist in the publicity efforts of twenty-two LVA programs and twelve affiliates are provided part-time program coordinators by libraries usually through LSCA funds. Other kinds of support include use of telephone, duplicating services, office equipment, and advocacy and awareness efforts.

The NYS Library has also promoted a statewide network of library-based literacy referral centers. With the growing awareness of the illiteracy issue it becomes more essential than ever to ease the system of responding to citizen inquiries. Library staffs across the state are being encouraged to find which agencies in their community best serve various adult learning needs in order to refer student callers to the appropriate service provider. Callers interested in volunteering are referred to LVA or other volunteer literacy programs within the community. Literacy Volunteers of New York State encourages local affiliates who promote their services in overlapping marketing areas to include the message, "Call your local library," in media public service announcements.

SELECTED PROFILES OF LVA/LITERACY PROJECTS IN NEW YORK STATE

Program Name—*Literacy Volunteers of America–Westchester County, Inc.* A collaboration of eight previously autonomous affiliates located in an affluent suburb of New York City, coordinated by the Westchester Library system.

Contact Person: Margaret Dean, executive director. Support staff: part-time workshop coordinator and administrative assistant.

Date Founded: 1983.

Location: Westchester Community College, Valhalla, New York.

Program Service Area: Westchester County, New York. Total population 866,600. An estimated 128,000 adults over eighteen need basic skills instruction. Special targets: nonreading adults in 0-5 grade-level range and non-English-speaking adults.

Program Focus: To provide free basic reading and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) tutoring on a one-to-one basis to functionally illiterate adults and non-English-speaking adults through trained volunteers. The LVA Westchester affiliate also has a strong peer tutoring project in Sing Sing Correctional facility.

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Training Activities: Ten basic reading and English-as-a-second-language workshops per year yielding 150 new tutors. Six in-service training sessions for experienced tutors. On-going sensitivity training for library personnel.

Numbers Served: Approximately 450 volunteers tutoring the same number of students.

Budget Information: LSCA provides \$25,000 for executive director's salary and benefits. Forty-six thousand dollars is derived from private funding: corporations, foundations, individuals. Westchester Library System provides tutoring space and materials in most of its thirty-eight member libraries.

Summary of Library Support: Materials—i.e., high interest/low level reading collection—referral, space for training and tutoring, copying, telephone, Friends of library financial support, and an LSCA grant for director's salary.

Evaluation: LVA—Westchester County, one of the largest LVA affiliates in the country, attributes much of its success to the support of the thirty-eight member libraries that provide a friendly, open-door policy to both tutors and students. The Westchester Library System Board of Directors voted literacy as the number one priority to be addressed by member libraries in the 1980s.

Problems: Librarians are still not as informed as they should be. Overworked staff and the influx of new librarians need continuous updating and sensitizing to the needs of nonreading and low-level reading adults. Program funding is insecure under present LSCA grant arrangements.

Program Name—Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program.

Contact Person: Jeanne Cowen, coordinator. Support Staff: fourteen full-time; twelve part-time professional and clerical staff in five learning centers.

Date Founded: 1975 through Literacy Volunteers of America.

Location: Brooklyn Public Library, Central Library, Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn.

Program Service Area: Borough of Brooklyn, New York.

Program Focus: To provide free basic reading instruction to 0-5 grade-level readers, on a one-to-one tutoring basis or in small-group settings.

To provide on-site conversational English class instruction through the NYC Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. To encourage computer-assisted literacy instruction to interested students. Brooklyn Library reading centers make sixteen computers available to basic skills students. Through extensive outreach with community agencies the Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program specifically targets high school dropouts and unemployed youth.

Training Activities: Conduct nine to twelve basic reading workshops per year, yielding approximately 250-300 volunteer tutors; and conduct several in-service training sessions for experienced tutors. Sensitivity training for library staff and the public is conducted continuously.

Number Served: Approximately 400 volunteers; 500-600 basic reading students, 200-300 ESL students receiving ABE instruction.

Budget Information: New York City's Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) totally finances this program at \$600,000 annually (through 1987), as a pilot literacy project. Brooklyn Public Library provides training, tutoring space, and classrooms for ESL instructors as well as materials.

Summary of Library Support: The Brooklyn Public Library Reading Project is a fully library-sponsored program, governed by library administrators and library board of trustees. The project consists of five major learning centers involving eighteen library branches. Extensive high interest/low level reading instructional support materials are made available through all branches. The library also makes computers and cassettes available to both tutors and students for skills practice and reinforcement.

The Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Project is among the first volunteer literacy programs to develop a student council allowing students a voice in the program services and the opportunity to establish a mutual support system. Participation in the student council went from seven to sixty-nine students in the first year. Student retention in the literacy program has increased significantly since initiation of the student council and program staff and tutors feel they have a better insight to special student problems and needs.

Evaluation: This program is a rare example of a totally library-subsidized volunteer literacy program. The library's allocation of over twenty staff dedicated to literacy services enables the program to be innovative in its approach to recruitment, training, and student retention. In some instances students have progressed to become part-time employees of the literacy program.

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Problems: When city funding ceases in 1987, Brooklyn Public Library is expected to assume the financial burden of the program, or find alternative funding. There is concern that the current high quality of literacy services will be curtailed if funding is drastically reduced.

Other Literacy Volunteer Programs

The Onondaga County Public Library is working with Literacy Volunteers of America, Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse, Laubach Literacy, the Adult Basic Learning Center, and all other local literacy providers to promote literacy programs in the Syracuse area on radio and television and through brochures and fliers. A project assistant provides information and support for students and tutors and instructs inmates weekly at a local correctional facility. In addition to special collections of new reader materials, the Borg-Warner System 80, an audiovisual teaching machine, is available at sixteen libraries and provides individualized learning experiences for over 3000 patrons. Onondaga County Public Library also compiled a directory containing referral information on local literacy and adult education programs. Contact: Jane Cathcart, extension services librarian, Onondaga County Public Library, Syracuse, New York.

Chemung-Southern Tier Library System used \$25,000 in LSCA monies to support a literacy volunteer program in cooperation with Literacy Volunteers of the Central Southern Tier. The system hired a director for the literacy program and established the program at the Corning Public Library. In addition to training, tutoring, and support services, the program also emphasizes the development of personal computer programs to assist tutors and students. Five libraries use microcomputers and specially designed teaching programs and teacher's guides. Contact: Kim Spencer, director, LV of the Central Southern Tier, Corning Public Library, Corning, New York.

The Mid-York Library System cooperates with the Literacy Volunteers of the Mohawk Valley in using computer technology for tutoring. The system acquired an Apple IIe computer provided by LSCA funds. Mid-York has sponsored a literacy project for over eight years and provides space, clerical assistance, professional liaison, and public relations assistance. From July 1984 through June 1985 eighty-eight volunteers provided 6000 hours of tutoring and support help for ninety students. Contact: Esther Bendik, coordinator, LV-Mohawk Valley, Mid-York Library System, Utica, New York.

Connecticut

LVA affiliates in Connecticut report similar library support of their literacy efforts. Nine of the eighteen affiliates are headquartered in libraries and granted free use of library equipment, telephones, and outreach services. Seventeen of the affiliates are provided tutoring space within libraries and fifteen use library facilities for tutor training and in-service workshops. Most of the affiliates include library representatives on their boards.

All the libraries incorporate high interest/low level reading materials in their collections. In 1984 the Connecticut State Library granted \$1000 to each of the public libraries in the eighteen Connecticut communities with LVA affiliates for the purchase of literacy materials.

LSCA grants funded the start-up of two Connecticut LVA programs ten years ago. After the initial two years the affiliates became financially independent while retaining the library location for their programs.

Over the years libraries have generously allocated LSCA funds to literacy-related needs—e.g., materials, sponsorship of LVA tutor training workshops. In 1985 the Connecticut State Library earmarked an extra \$15,000 of LSCA money for literacy. LVA affiliates applied for and received much of this allocation for their program support.

Governor William O'Neil recently announced a statewide Coalition for Literacy in Connecticut calling for the joint efforts of the State Library, Department of Education, and Literacy Volunteers of Connecticut to increase the public's awareness of illiteracy and arouse more private and public resources for literacy efforts.

According to Julia Stone, director of LV—Connecticut, the LVA/library liaison is the most sensible approach to the volunteer literacy movement. Libraries are often community centers dedicated to free access and information. LVA programs benefit greatly from the specialized materials and professional referral services that librarians provide. The many in-kind services provided by libraries take some of the pressure off volunteers to raise the dollars needed for program operation.

Libraries benefit from the LVA connection by acquiring new readers as regular patrons and by enabling libraries to fulfill their primary institutional role: serving the whole public in acquiring informational and life-long knowledge.

California

The California Literacy Campaign was developed in 1983 to involve libraries in a grassroots effort to increase adult literacy in their

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communities. The California State Library made a major commitment of \$2,515,000 in LSCA awards to twenty-seven libraries in 1984. An equal amount was granted from state funds giving the campaign leadership potential among statewide literacy efforts.

The California Literacy Campaign has been accompanied by a highly visible promotional effort to sensitize the public to the debilitating effect of illiteracy on the individual who cannot participate fully in society, and the effect on the community. The campaign deliberately targets a local response to a defined illiteracy problem within communities. The call for volunteers is a primary focus while involved libraries are encouraged to develop working relationships with public service agencies, schools, colleges, and service organizations in order to share resources, referrals, and responsibilities. Such coordination did not generally exist prior to the literacy campaign. It is hoped that such collaboration of existing services and the enlistment of volunteers will make appreciable impact on local illiteracy statistics.

Over 100 communities are being served by library campaign-funded literacy programs. In several instances Literacy Volunteers of America tutor-training was selected as the core training for these projects.

PROFILES

Program Name—*Literacy Volunteers of America, Imperial Valley, California.*

Contact Person: Lyvier Conss, executive director. Support Staff: two college student assistants.

Date Founded: 1984.

Location: Imperial County Free Library, El Centro, California.

Program Service Area: Imperial County (4000 square miles, primarily agricultural and rural and encompassing twelve towns). Population: 100,000—an estimated 20,000 over eighteen need basic reading instruction.

Program Focus: To make a significant impact on the functional illiteracy problem affecting 20,000 adults in Imperial Valley. Specializes in one-to-one tutoring in basic reading to adults with 0-5 grade-level reading skills. Migrant farm workers are a special focus group.

Training Activities: Basic Reading Tutor Training Workshops—twelve per year. Outreach training at the local community college. In-service tutor training—five per year. Mini-seminars to sensitize library staff to adult new reader needs.

Numbers Served: Fifty-eight tutors and sixty-one students (1985).

Budget Information: The California Literacy Campaign funds the executive director position; library provides the office and equipment and tutoring and training space. Community-awareness events raise some funds that are used for paid publicity.

Summary of Library Support: Site library collaborates with other libraries: Brawley, El Centro, and seven branches, as well as social service agencies, and the Migrant Workers Association to reach as many volunteers and students as possible. Librarians have been most cooperative in providing coping skills materials to the program.

Evaluation: This LVA/Library project stands as a successful model of the California Literacy Campaign effort. Publicity accompanying the statewide campaign encourages librarians to become fully involved and open their doors to serve the adult new reader.

Problem: Concern that when the state campaign ends, the already pinched library budgets will not be able to assume the extra burden of specialized literacy projects. The project also sees a continuous need to recruit and retain more volunteer tutors.

Program Name—*Literacy Volunteers of Bay County, Florida.*

Contact Person: Sandra Pierce, volunteer coordinator. Supported by part-time library assistant.

Date Founded: 1981.

Location: Bay County Public Library, Panama City, Florida.

Program Service Area: Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, and Washington Counties, Florida. Approximately 40,000 adults over eighteen with less than nine years education.

Program Focus: To fight illiteracy in conjunction with other professionals through the use of trained volunteers. This is the only program in the Bay County area offering one-to-one tutoring to 0-5 grade-level readers.

Training Activities: Four annual basic reading tutor-training workshops. Tutor in service, two per year. Awareness workshops to inform library staff of students' needs.

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Budget Information: LSCA funds the volunteer coordinator's salary. The library funds the assistant's position, provides office space, telephone, copier, equipment, and tutoring/workshop space. Some community fund-raising is conducted by LV-Bay County.

Summary of Library Support: Library actually subsidizes this LVA program. Collaboration with fourteen branch libraries in a six-county area and other adult education programs and social service agencies provides effective outreach potential. The library-provided high interest/low level reading collection is an asset to tutor and students.

Evaluation: Coordinator feels this LVA affiliate works best in the library because the library network provides an identifiable structure to draw both tutors and students in this diverse and rural geographic area.

Future Needs: To devise better methods of servicing the hard-to-reach nonreader.

Program Name—*Literacy Volunteers, Southbridge, Massachusetts.*

Contact Person: Joanne Hammerly, executive director.

Date Founded: 1975 through LSCA funding.

Location: Jacob Edwards Library, Southbridge, Massachusetts.

Program Service Area: Three-town are of Southbridge, Sturbridge, Charlton, 30,000 (total population); approximately 3000 nonreading or non-English-speaking adults. Special targets: Approximately 1100 Hispanic and Southeast Asian population.

Program Focus: To respond to the community's mandate to upgrade adult basic skills service with particular emphasis on offering conversational English skills to the foreign born. This LVA program serves mostly ESL students.

Training Activities: Four annual basic reading and ESL tutor-training workshops. In-service training for tutors, two per year, including special interest subjects—e.g., learning disabilities and computer-assisted literacy.

Numbers Served: Seventy-two volunteers serving ninety-two students.

Budget Information: United Way funds director's salary; local foundations and corporations fund operating expenses and special events. Library provides office/tutoring/training space and staff assistance.

Summary of Library Support: Excellent board of trustees support; library director serves as program treasurer and fiscal agent. Entire staff

in tune with the program and helpful in providing materials needed by tutors and students.

Evaluation: The library is the central community focus for adult basic skills help. Besides in-kind space and materials support, the library used an LSCA grant to fund a special computer assisted literacy service for LVA tutors and students. The library setting helps ensure student retention and continued growth in reading skills. The library in turn receives excellent public relations from the literacy program, as well as a continuous influx of new library users.

Future Needs: An even more committed attitude and additional financial resources to allocate more staff hours to the literacy project. Continuous need to increase the number of volunteers.

Conclusion

A volunteer's commitment to teach an adult to read has frequently changed an individual's life. That student is affirmed—sometimes for the first time in his life—by the realization that another person cares enough to invest in him and by the success in his own reading. The student's commitment to basic skills learning is also a life changing process. As learning increases, the individual is empowered to act in society on his own behalf.

A library's commitment to serve the functionally illiterate population also involves the commitment to change. Libraries offering the just-described support to volunteer literacy programs run the risk of self-complacency. Libraries feel justly proud of meeting ALA's goals of delivering user-oriented library and informational services to all. Library administrators also pride themselves on being alternative learning centers for the independent learners by providing the means of continuing education to patrons of all needs and capacities.

In conducting this survey of literacy projects in libraries, a recurring theme from project directors was the perception of the library as a community center—the hub of local learning. Such a nonthreatening, open-door approach makes the library a natural setting for a literacy program. Literacy programs within libraries have the additional advantage of benefiting from immediate access to professionals who can gather, identify, and recommend materials to help tutors and students. There is no argument about the important role libraries play in literacy service. There is room for improvement, however. In fact, to affect appreciable reversals in national illiteracy statistics there is a mandate for change in some library attitudes and approaches.

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For American libraries to become a major vehicle in the eradication of illiteracy, a commitment beyond physical space, a percentage of time of already overworked librarians and in-kind resources is urgently needed. Substantial resources, human and financial, must be allocated to basic skills service—similar to library budgets earmarked for art and music, services to the handicapped, or audiovisual services. A library staff person dedicated to needs assessment, referring and reaching out to the new or nonreader as well as coordinating adult basic skills materials, would commit a library to a much more progressive role in literacy service. Volunteer coordinators would still handle tutor recruitment, training, and technical assistance but would benefit from a continual referral of students.

Library administrators must objectively evaluate any physical or perceived institutional barrier to the lowest level readers within their community. Libraries *can* be community centers, but do they draw the functional illiterate who has already experienced institutional failure in schools or workplaces? Efforts must be made to eliminate as many of these barriers as possible. Collaboration with outside social service agencies will help identify clientele. Making them library users is the next challenge.

The library open-door policy to independent learners is commendable. Functionally illiterate adults, however, are not independent learners. Adults in literacy programs aspire to be self-reliant, but literacy students typically demonstrate a myriad of needs of which reading is only a part. Frequently there are financial, health, legal, child care, or even marital problems that must be addressed before or along with the basic skills needs. Librarians in tune with these potential problems of their clientele and knowledgeable of the community's social service agencies can offer immeasurable assistance to the adult new reader. Independent learning can only take place when basic needs are met.

Beyond identifying and collecting high interest/low level materials for new readers, librarians can undertake production of materials that address special needs. For example, directories of social agencies along with their services could be rewritten and accessibly produced for low-level readers' comprehension.

Libraries could further enrich volunteer literacy programs by lending professional expertise in many management or technical areas such as fiscal management, public relations, and board development. The most successful programs continuously seek new human resources who can contribute to the affiliate with renewed spirit and fresh insight. Librarians can help affiliates identify the movers and shakers in the community.

Progressive libraries frequently offer social or informational programs to patrons with special interests—e.g., film clubs, opera previews, book reviews. Making these programs available to new or low-level readers could be most rewarding for all concerned. Other possibilities are limitless: a student organization that could help librarians and tutors better identify needs and wants; guest speakers from health, ABE, business, or employment agencies; and literacy-based computer instructions.

A final suggestion for librarians is to stay in tune with the most advanced materials and user-friendly equipment for adult learning—e.g., computer, audiovisual, video. Investigation and commitment to provide such technology can help maintain new students' interest and help gain the library a long-term user.

The increasing library involvement with LVA programs has had a most positive effect on expanding literacy services in many communities. Yet, the potential for even greater library commitment remains almost open-ended. Involved librarians should share in the pride of helping to change the lives of many new readers and library patrons. Charles Mobley, a student from Brooklyn Public Library's reading program, participated in LVA's 1985 national conference. His comments on the experience provide inspiration to all literacy service providers: "It made me feel proud, not ashamed to express my feeling about belonging to this program. I have learned a lot and do not feel alone as I look around me. I encourage others like me to join because I know it will make a change in our future for better."

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